

It's an accent, not an affliction

Community Data Program, Annual Leads Meeting:
Immigration Panel

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May 15, 2019



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Speaking with an accent



1. Please call _____.
2. Ask her to bring these things with her from the _____:
3. Six spoons of fresh _____,
4. five thick slabs of _____,
5. and maybe a _____ for her brother Bob.

How well did you understand them?

1. Please call Stella.
2. Ask her to bring these things with her from the store:
3. Six spoons of fresh snow peas,
4. five thick slabs of thick cheese,
5. and maybe a snack for her brother Bob.

Who speaks with an accent?



Important terms

- accent: Listener's perceptions of the extent to which pronunciation deviates from an expected norm (Derwing & Munro, 2015).
 - foreign accent: Pronunciation that is affected by a person's other language(s).
- comprehensibility: Listener's perceptions of the ease or difficulty in understanding speech (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

What do accents tell us?

- where a person is from
- how old a someone is
- a person's social class

What do accents not tell us?

- how likeable a person is
- how beautiful someone is
- how smart a person is

Accentedness and Comprehensibility

- Foreign accents:
 - are highly salient (Flege, 1984; Munro et al., 2003).
 - are rated consistently (Flege, 1984; Munro et al., 2003).
 - are often not associated with with reduced comprehensibility (Derwing & Munro, 2015).

Stereotyping on the basis of accents

- Certain speech varieties rated more favourably than others (e.g., Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997).
- Second language speech often evaluated negatively.
 - teacher evaluation of student work (Ford, 1984)
 - employment (Davila et al., 1993)
 - assessment of speech errors (Hu & Su, 2015)

What we know

- Most nonnative speakers will speak with a foreign accent.
- Many foreign accents can be understood quite well.
- People make judgments about people who speak with a foreign accent.
- Raters are consistent in their ratings of foreign accent.

Is it possible to bias listeners in their ratings of speech samples?

with

Pavel Trofimovich

Kym Taylor Reid

Why this matters

- It may be that a listener is affected by positive or negative comments provided by a friend or colleague.
- Biases may carry over into other settings, for example:
 - hiring decisions
 - high-stakes language exams

Study 1

*Will a biasing orientation affect the ratings
provided by Montreal Anglophones?*

Methodology

- Speakers
 - Francophone speakers of English
- Raters
 - 10 older Anglophones in Montreal born before Bill 101 (1977)
 - 10 in the positive bias condition
 - 10 in the negative bias condition
 - 10 baseline raters

- Rating

The screenshot shows a software interface for rating audio samples. At the top, there are fields for 'Sound Path' (C:\Users\Administrator\Dropbox\Projects\Mary Pavel Pimming) and 'File Name' (test), both with 'Browse' buttons. Below these is a 'Save Path' field (C:\Users\Administrator\Desktop) with a 'Browse' button. The main section contains two horizontal sliders. The first slider is labeled 'Accentedness' and is flanked by a sad face icon on the left and a happy face icon on the right. The left end is labeled 'Heavily accented' and the right end is labeled 'No accent at all'. The second slider is labeled 'Comprehensibility' and is flanked by the text 'Hard to understand' on the left and 'Easy to understand' on the right. At the bottom left, it says 'Speaker # 1 of 3'. At the bottom center is a 'Listen' button.

Manipulation: Social bias orientation

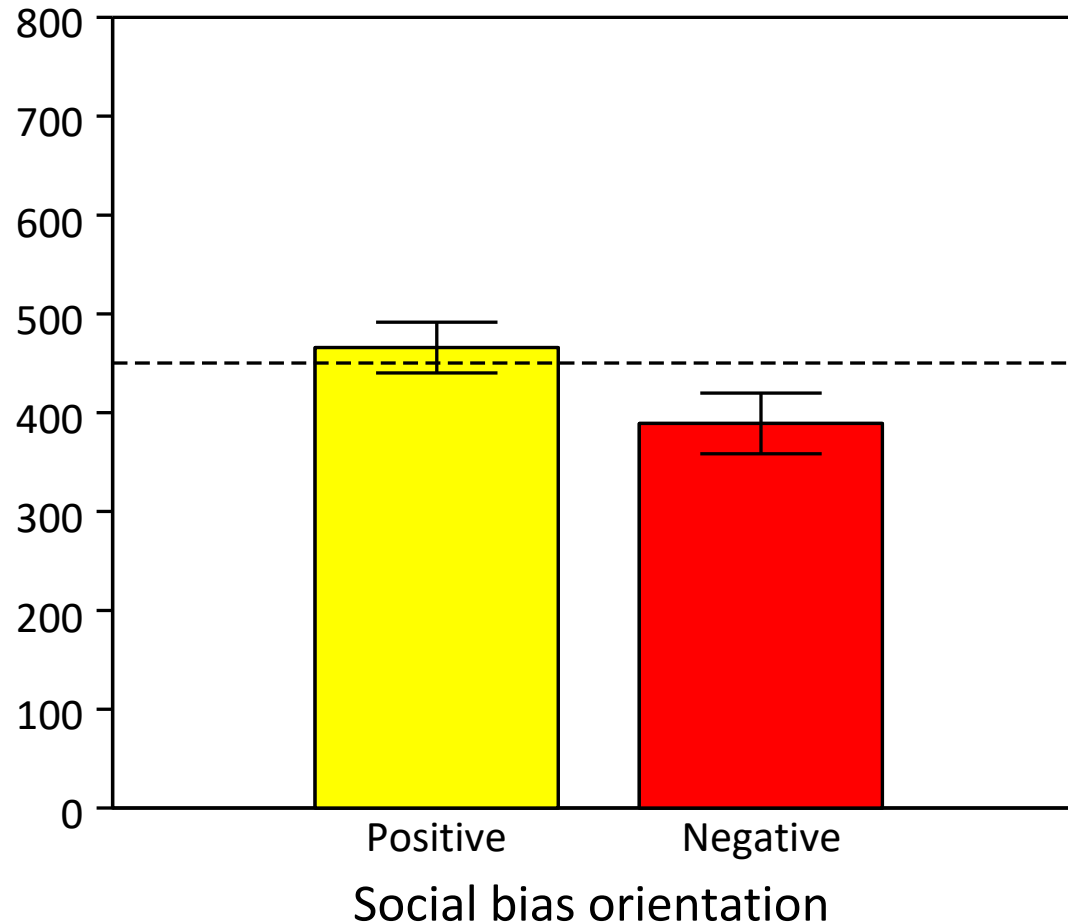
POSITIVE

I was so impressed that they provide such good service in English! The person I placed my order with was obviously a native speaker of French, but her English was really good! I mean, she had an accent, but it still sounded good and her grammar wasn't bad, either.

NEGATIVE

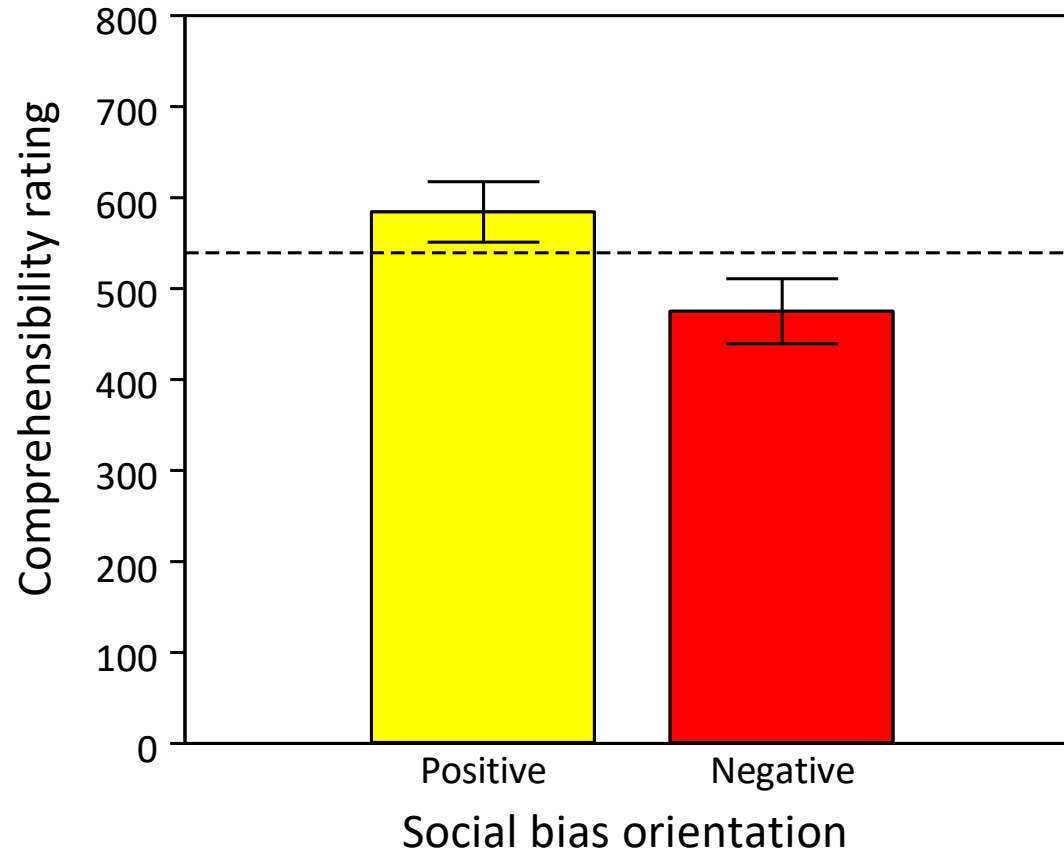
I can't believe they don't provide adequate service in English. I mean, the person I placed my order with was clearly a French speaker who never bothered to learn English very well. I could barely understand her! Her accent was awful and her grammar didn't even make sense.

Results: Accentedness



Negative impact of **negative** social bias
No impact of **positive** social bias

Results: Comprehensibility



Negative impact of **negative** social bias

Positive impact of **positive** social bias

Study 1: Implications

- It's relatively easy to negatively influence listeners' evaluations of speech.
- Some speech evaluations can be positively influenced.
- Listener training is essential, as listeners are unlikely to change without explicitly attending to biases (Bodenhausen & Moreno, 2000).

Study 2

*Will a biasing orientation affect the ratings
provided by teachers?*

Methodology

- Speakers: Canadians speakers of German
- Raters: German teachers
 - 10 in the positive bias condition
 - 10 baseline raters
- Rating

Each condition had 5 native and 5 nonnative speakers of German

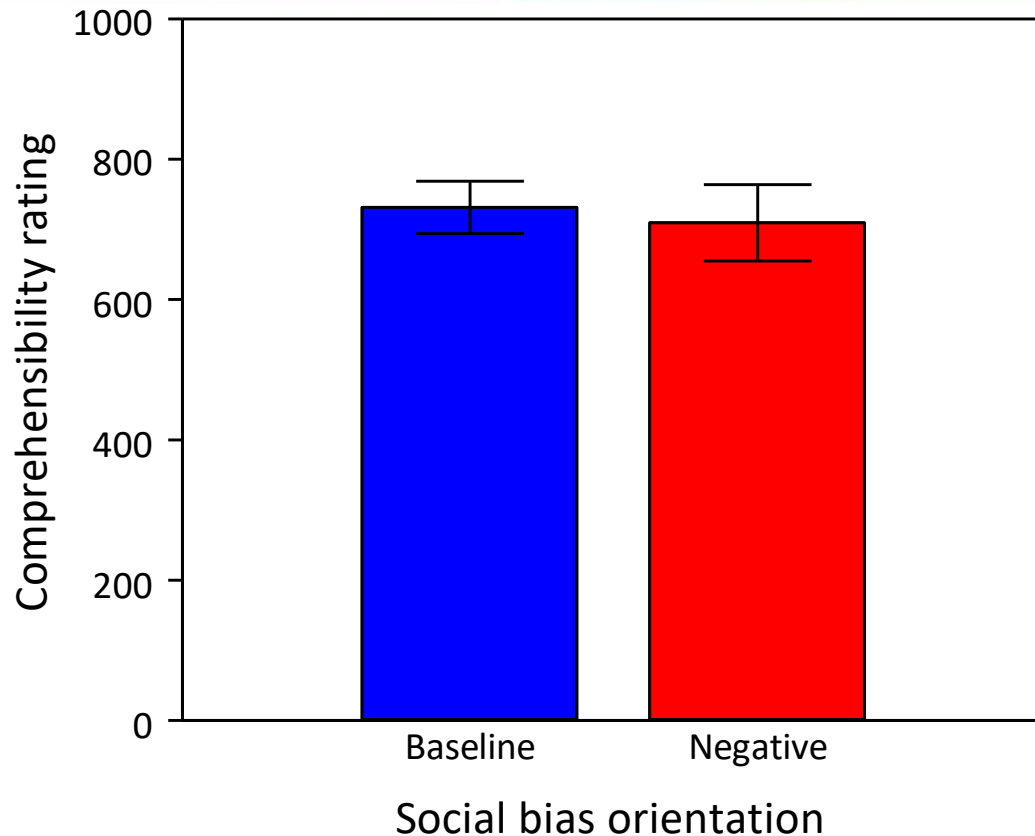
The screenshot shows the 'RatePronunciation' application window. At the top, there are fields for 'Ladepfad' (C:\Users\Administrator\Dropbox\Projects\Mary Pavel Primir) and 'Dateiname' (test), both with 'Blättern...' buttons. Below these is the 'Sicherungsordner' (C:\Users\Administrator\Desktop) with a 'Blättern...' button and a 'Start' button. The main area contains two horizontal sliders. The first slider is labeled 'Aussprache' and ranges from 'starker fremdsprachlicher Akzent' (sad face icon) to 'kaum wahrnehmbarer fremdsprachlicher Akzent' (happy face icon). The second slider is labeled 'Verständlichkeit' and ranges from 'schwer verständlich' to 'leicht verständlich'. At the bottom, there is a 'Lautsprecher #' field showing '1 von 3' and a 'Hör mit dem ersten Satz' button.

Manipulation: Social bias orientation

BASELINE NEGATIVE

I'm sorry. I just have to vent about something. You also teach German, so you understand my situation. I was just chatting with an undergraduate student majoring in German, and I honestly couldn't believe how little she could do in the language. I mean, you'd think that when you've nearly completed a degree in a language, you'd be able to do more with it. I could barely understand her. Her accent was awful, and her grammar didn't even make sense. You know, if you major in German you should be able to use it with anyone, especially fellow German learners. I can't believe that some German majors don't even bother to become fluent. It's ridiculous.

Results: Combined group



When speaker groups are combined, there is no effect of negative social bias compared to baseline.

Results: Role of social bias according to teacher first language

- Negative social bias orientation influenced native and nonnative speaker teachers differently/
 - When divided by listener status (native vs. nonnative speaker)
 - Downgrading by native speakers for accentedness and comprehensibility
 - Upgrading by nonnative speakers

Study 2: Implications

- It may be that teachers are able to provide stable ratings and may not be as susceptible to negative bias orientation as naïve listeners.
- But this may be mitigated by L1 status
 - Enhanced empathy on the part of nonnative speaking teachers in rating L2 speech

Synthesis

- Listeners' judgments of speech may be less stable than originally thought.
- Previous negative experiences may play a role in listeners' (e.g., examiners', interviewers') judgments of nonnative speakers.

What does this mean for those interacting with immigrants in Canada?

- Prevalence of interactions with nonnative speakers
- Role of previous experience
- Importance of bias training

And what does it mean for the immigrants themselves?

- Accents are normal (not an affliction)
- Shared onus for successful communication
- Comprehensibility training (not accent reduction)

Thank you!

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